The Rhumb Line

Fall/Winter 2025 Number 102

Our STEAMbox Family Workshops are back for the 2025-26 school year with a whole new slate of programming. These workshops are free thanks to the generous support of First Federal Savings.

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Maine Maritime Museum
243 Washington Street, Bath, Maine 04530
MaineMaritimeMuseum.org

Researching, Recovering, Reconsidering, *Re|Sounding*

by Chris Timm
Executive Director

In the final section of our *Upon That Isle in Maine* exhibition, a panel by Chris Van Dusen and the museum encourages visitors: *"I hope that you keep reading and keep using your imagination. That you let it run wild every now and then. That you get outside and explore. Play. Create. And I hope that you never lose your sense of wonder for this beautiful, colorful world."* Those words reflect a core belief of ours: when we cultivate the relationship between people and Maine's waters, we foster curiosity, opportunity, and empathy. And to cultivate that in others, we must remain curious ourselves.

What is now Maine Maritime Museum began in 1962 as the Marine Research Society of Bath, focused on publishing a two-volume history of the region—*A Maritime History of Bath, Maine and the Kennebec River Region.* The book shaped how this area's history was understood, especially through its meticulous synthesis of primary sources to document vessels and shipyards. Sixty years later, we must also acknowledge its gaps—where it omits or erases. This process propels scholarship forward.

Framing matters. *A Maritime History of Bath* begins the maritime story of this land with the Popham Colony, describing the Indigenous people of the region as "land people." Island communities appear faintly, while the starring roles go to ships themselves. Even that picture is incomplete: the schooner *Wyoming*—the longest wooden vessel ever built—is absent, as are the lives of its crew.

There are so many opportunities to deepen this maritime story. How did Maine's inland and coastal waterways connect through a remarkable network of canoe portages—and how does the canoe itself, an iconic image of Maine, and its builders tell a different story? How did life differ across island communities, say, between Malaga or Monhegan? What was it like to crew the *Wyoming? **Who** crewed the Wyoming?*

After three years of development, we are pleased to open our new special exhibition, *Re|Sounding.* To "sound" is to measure depth beneath a vessel. This exhibition re-measures the depths of our knowledge of Maine's maritime past, recovering a deeper understanding of these waters and the people whose lives they shape. Guided by a group of humanities scholars and community leaders,

The canoe *Aputamkon* built in 2024 by Wabanaki craftsmen using all traditional methods is on display.

Photo Credit: Jason Pardilla, Penobscot

Nyugen E. Smith has loaned his mix media sculpture *Bundlehouse FS Mini No. 12 (Garvey aight),* 2024 to the exhibition. Smith is an Indigo Arts Alliance alumni and his artistic practice explores the ongoing legacy of the African Diaspora.

Photo Credit: Kevin David

Re|Sounding explores the undertold Indigenous and Black histories of this land and water.

Mariners by nature explore, and with that spirit we look forward to our continued work charting new lines of inquiry, opening new understandings, and sharing new stories. In other words, we choose to remain curious.

Now on View

Re|Sounding

November 2025–October 2027

This innovative, multi-media exhibit includes historical context and objects from the museum's collection, as well as words and works from contemporary artists, writers, and performers.

Maine Maritime Museum connects people to the past, present, and future of Maine's waterways and their global reach.

Around the Museum

Trustee Emeritus Stephen Caulfield cutting a proverbial rug with his family at the gala—it's THE party of the summer!

Photo credit: Kaitlin Toto

Chris Timm, Executive Director, giving the keynote speech at our annual fundraising gala. Photo credit: Kaitlin Toto

We're still dreaming about our autumn golden hour cruises.

Photo credit: Two Adventurous Souls

Children's book author Chris Van Dusen has been exceedingly generous with his time, coming to the museum for multiple Story Time sessions, to signing stacks and stacks of books, and even leading a private gallery tour of our exhibit *Upon That Isle in Maine: The Story & Works of Chris Van Dusen* exclusively for museum members.

Flight Deck Brewing's onsite pizza and beer garden was a huge hit and we can't wait to see what's in store for 2026!

Photo credit: Active Beer Geek

Our Kennebec Explorers Day Campers were on site to witness an Arleigh Burke destroyer trial leaving General Dynamics-Bath Iron Works. Hopefully the crew waved back!

Special Events Manager and resident plant enthusiast Teresa Gandler leads a guided plant walk for some of our most generous donors.

Merrymeeting cruises departed with a record number of visitors in 2025.

Photo credit: Two Adventurous Souls

Pints on the Pier

This year, we welcomed a record number of folks to sample beverages along the gorgeous Kennebec River.

Attendees stack a giant block set, made on site in our Boatshop!

Stevie's Poem Store and Auspicious Citrus offered complimentary poems to attendees, for those with a thirst for verse!

Lauren Crosby, co-owner of OystHERS Raw Bar & Bubbly, is also a musician and kept the Pints crowd entertained despite the cooler, cloudy weather.

Rhumb Line

A line on the earth's surface which intersects all meridians and parallels of latitude at the same angle. A line of constant course is a rhumb line.

Boatshop Happenings

by Kurt Spiridakis
Director of Boatbuilding

Exhibit Support

Boatshop volunteer Bob Bernier has been hard at work making a new half model of *Wyoming* for the Percy & Small exhibit refresh. This is being done as a "builder's model," constructed entirely of pine and without any extra flair or details, the utilitarian version a boatbuilder would have built to quickly get dimensions for the full-size vessel. Bob's model will hang in the McEvoy Gallery, which will serve as the gateway to the Percy & Small Shipyard when the exhibit opens next year. Boatshop volunteer Richard Spear is assisting with the trail board carving, the only planned accent on the model.

Homeschool Boatbuilding

In the previous issue of *The Rhumb Line,* we wrote about the launch of a homeschool woodworking program. Students ages 9–14 spent two hours a week in the Boatshop, learning basic woodworking and completing small projects to take home. Since the launch of our four-week sessions in December 2024, we have run continuously through the year (with a short summer break) and are now in our ninth session. Currently we are building two 9' rowboats with 10 students, and half the class has signed up for every session so far!

Discovery Boatbuilding

The 2025–26 school year marks 29, 15, 9, and 8 years of our woodworking and boatbuilding programs with our four partner schools—more than 60 total school years of participation in Maine Maritime Museum's Discovery Boatbuilding program! Every student attends class in the Boatshop one day a week, and every student begins by building a three-legged stool. We are slated to build eight plank-on-frame skiffs over the winter.

Richard Spear, Woodcarver

Many have seen museum volunteer Richard Spear's relief carvings around campus (and town), especially in the Boatshop, on the Pirate's Paradise playship, and in the Mould Loft, where Richard has been demonstrating relief carving since 2012. This space is currently under renovation and set to re-open in June 2026, so Richard and all his beautiful carvings have decamped to the Boatshop building. Next season, you can find Richard in his new home Mondays on B-deck (one floor below the Boatshop), working out of a stall built and installed by fellow volunteers.

Projects in the Watercraft Restoration Center

Three projects are happening concurrently in the Watercraft Restoration Center. First, a restoration of a 12' Five Islands Skiff rowboat (ca. 1910) for a local family is nearing completion. It required a new transom, partial keel and garboards, and many interior parts.

Second, a small Herreshoff-built sailboat is getting a minor restoration. Part of the Frostbite dinghy class and built in 1934 at the Herreshoff Manufacturing Company, this 90-year-old boat is being made watertight and receiving new coatings. It plans to sail again in Small Point Harbor next summer.

Finally, a new 15' Five Islands Skiff is under construction, the second boat built from these moulds using all local materials. Volunteers hope to complete and launch in fall 2026.

Land Acknowledgement

by Andrea Headley
Fundraising & Creative Strategist

Recently, the museum began work on an institutional land acknowledgement. The process was approached with thoughtfulness and care, and we you will read this synopsis of our process with the same mindset.

Before the self-selecting staff working group of Luke Gates-Milardo, Allie Travers, Teresa Gandler, and I, met for the first time, we read a few foundational histories that informed our understanding of colonization in the region in which the museum resides—including the Maine Memory Network's webpages on the Kennebec and Pejepscot Proprietors, the Treaty of Arrowsic, and the Phipps Proclamation.

In our initial meeting, we asked some basic questions to lay the groundwork. These served as guideposts in each session to keep us focused:

Why create a land acknowledgement?

- To acknowledge as fact the people whose ancestors are the original inhabitants of this land and to combat the attempted erasure of communities, cultures, and traditions
- To spark interest in further education, both for our institution to commit to more learning and to inspire our visitors to do the same
- To counteract false founding myths that begin Maine's maritime history with colonial settlement
- To publicly recognize the lasting injustices brought about by colonial expansion
- To embrace the truth of this place and its history

What is the end goal?

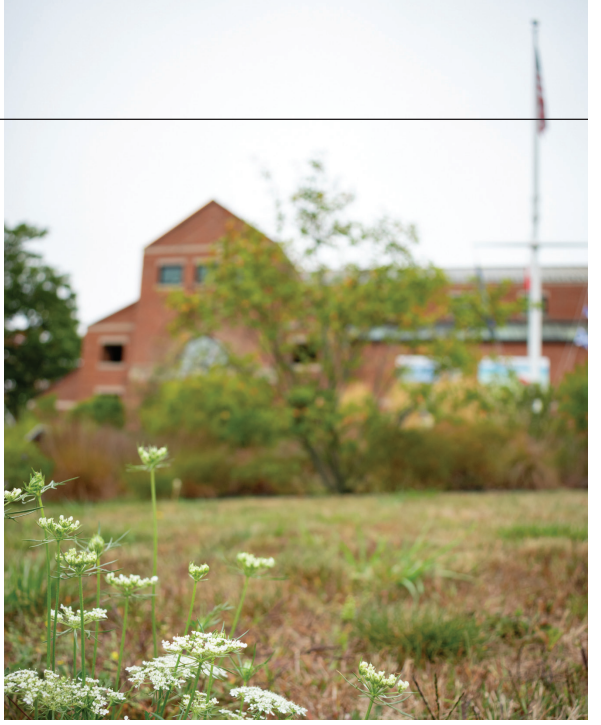
- To create a safe space for inviting, listening to, and sharing stories across cultures and communities
- To develop and foster relationships with the Wabanaki people that demonstrate our desire to learn, improve, and decolonize our institution
- To educate visitors on the deeper history of this place and to encourage learning from the cultures and customs of its Indigenous communities
- To combat erasure

How will it have the largest impact?

- By being placed in a location easily visible to all who enter the museum
- By living on our website
- By being clear and succinct, allowing all to read and understand it
- By being the first of many actions taken, eventually allowing for similar acknowledgements to exist across the grounds and galleries, including installations by Indigenous artists, interpretive signage about Indigenous river usage, and exhibitions that relay a full, inclusive version of Maine's maritime identity
- By informing our Plaza inlay map's inclusion of Indigenous place names
- By becoming one focus of the staff and Board's educational journey

How broad is our definition of place?

- We recognize our 26-acre campus, the Kennebec River, Merrymeeting Bay, and the broader reach of Maine's waterways as within the scope of this statement creation
- We recognize Indigenous practices as examples of environmental stewardship and therefore vital to the definition of place
- We recognize place must include the painful colonial history and its impacts still today



We also looked at similar institutions' land acknowledgements for best practices on their use of language and scope and found inspiration on the websites of the Abbe Museum, the Peary-MacMillan Arctic Museum, and the Portland Public Library.

After two collaborative writing sessions, we shared a draft statement with our land acknowledgement consultant, Director of Cultural and Historic Preservation for the Penobscot Nation James Eric Francis, Sr. He provided guidance for not only the statement, but also for actions to make the statement more impactful.

We plan to display the statement on the museum grounds and website this winter. And we plan to continue the work, of which this is the first step.

Maine Maritime Museum is located on the unsurrendered homeland of the Wabanaki, who have stewarded these lands and waters for generations. The Wabanaki nations include the Abenaki, Maliseet, Mi'kmaq, Passamaquoddy, and Penobscot.

We acknowledge the ongoing impacts of colonialism—the histories untold, lands unceded, and efforts to erase Indigenous peoples and cultures. We commit to listening to Indigenous communities, learning true and inclusive histories, and acting as trustworthy stewards of this region's stories and spaces.

Business Support Program

The museum is extremely grateful for the support of local businesses giving at our Corporate Sponsor levels (listed below). After another visitor-filled season, we are reminded just how important their philanthropy is to our exhibitions, education initiatives, programs, and Boatshop activities. So, please thank them for their generosity as you visit their establishments!

As of September 24, 2025

Figurehead
Bath Savings Institution

Mainsail
American Cruise Lines
General Dynamics–Bath Iron Works
The Reny Charitable Foundation

Capstan
A.G.A. Correa & Son
Bangor Savings Bank
Cashman Dredging and Marine Contracting Co., LLC
Central Maine Power Company
Crooker Construction LLC
Diversified Communications
M.W. Sewall
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Mast
A Morning In Maine
Anna's Water's Edge Restaurant
Artforms, Inc.
Bamforth Marine
Bar Harbor Bank & Trust
Bath Cannabis Company
Bill Dodge Auto Group
Bixby & Co.
Blue Elephant Events & Catering
Brown Dog Inn
Browne Trading Company
Byrnes' Irish Pub
Churchill Events
Country Farm Furniture
Data Defined
Derecktor Robinhood
The Dolphin Marina & Restaurant
Epifanes North America
Fairfield Inn & Suites by Marriott - Brunswick Freeport
G&E Roofing Co., Inc.
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New England Tent and Awning
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Royal River Boatyard & Repair
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Sappi North America
Schooner Eastwind
Shelter Institute, Inc.
Sisters Gourmet Deli
Stone Cove Catering
Thomas Yacht
Thomaston Place Auction Galleries, Inc.
Vigilant Wealth Management
The White Mountain Hotel & Resort

Honor/Memorial Gifts

(2/21/25–9/16/25)

In Honor of
Elena Vandervoort
Martin and Elizabeth Lakeman

In Honor of
Joshua Briggs
Anonymous
Kim and Henry Goldberg

In Memory of
Carol Cusimano Bernier
Robert Bernier

In Memory of
Charles E. Burden, M.D.
Mabel Gerquest

In Memory of
Christopher C. Nichols
Arthur and Nancy Ohanian

In Memory of
Craig Lane
William and Suzanne Bushnell

In Memory of
James L. Amundsen
Jay and Lenore Friedland

In Memory of
Linda A. MacMillan
William and Suzanne Bushnell

In Memory of
Nathaniel "Nick" Hyde
Diane Deans
Gwen Norris
David Parry and Sally Casey
Charles and Diana Todd

In Memory of
Peter D. Watson
Martin and Nancy Damiani
Jane Haeni
Dana and Joan Hill
Polly Johnson
Alan and Barbara MacGregor
Nora's Friends at Spurwink

In Memory of
Richard Hart
Veda Ferris
Jesse Sansom

In Memory of
Richard L. Rotnem
William and Suzanne Bushnell
Judie Garcia
Martha and David Reifschneider
Terry Segal

In Memory of
William E. Haggett
Kristin Fletcher and Craig Sipe

In a Donor's Own Words

We often tell our supporters why they should give to Maine Maritime Museum, but this time we're switching it up and letting one of our supporters speak for themselves.

Mary Schreiber is a devoted volunteer here at the museum, volunteering her time as a Donnell House guide and often assisting with museum events such as Pints on the Pier. She also gives generously to the museum as a member of the Compass Circle. Here is what she shared about why she gives:

Volunteer & Compass Circle member Mary Schreiber at the 2025 Annual Gala

Photo credit: Kaitlin Toto

Maine Maritime Museum is more than a beautiful place and educational, engaging experience. It's the joy of sharing the spirit of Maine and the warmth of friendship. It's an opportunity to give as well as to receive.

Maine Maritime Museum isn't perfect.

But we have a vibrant Boatshop, a welcome shipbuilder's home, exciting exhibits for all ages, beautiful Kennebec River setting, and a wealth of potential friends.

Maine Maritime Museum is sharing what you know, what you remember, what you value, what you enjoy, what you create, and what you restore, striving together to ensure a special place and experience.

Keep going and growing.

Maine Maritime Museum is volunteers and staff offering services and energy to someplace we love. The joy of giving is to do our part.

Membership Corner

Board of Trustee chair Tom Whelan thanked former chair and outgoing trusteee Laura Burns on behalf of the museum for all of her work shepherding the museum. Laura may have termed out but her contributions and leadership helped us reach so many achievements over the years and she will remain part of our extended museum community.

This summer, we heard from Sue, an aspiring boatbuilder (and museum member), who completed a class at WoodenBoat School about lofting, taught by Greg Rossel.

One of the boats selected to loft was *Mollie,* a small watercraft in our collection from the late 1800s. While this vessel is not typically on view to the public, when Sue contacted us and asked to see it, the stars aligned and Kurt Spiridakis, our director of boatbuilding, was able to accommodate a visit. It's a welcome reminder of our place is this boatbuilding community.

Friend of the museum and cheese expert Susan Sherill Axelrod stopped by to do a guided cheese tasting for our most generous supports. Attendees learned about different practices in cheese making throughout history, the state of the industry today, and got to sample some a highly curated selection of fantastic cheeses. Inquiring minds are wondering if this can become a monthly event...

Upcoming Events

Story Time with Chris Van Dusen

Tuesday, January 27, 10:00–10:30 am

FREE, preregistration is required.

Boat America: A Course on Responsible Boating

Saturdays & Sundays, March 7, 8, 14, & 15, 4:00–6:00 pm

See MaineMaritimeMuseum.org for details.

STEAMbox Family Workshops | 10:30–11:30 am

FREE thanks to the support of First Federal Savings.
The content is appropriate for ages 4–10, but all are welcome.

Secrets of Seals | December 13
What is the difference between a grey seal and a harbor seal? Complete a series of activities that teach us about the nature of these amazing creatures that can be found on the Kennebec River. We will explore migration patterns, food, blubber, and differences in the two species, before making seal creations.

Transforming Trees | January 10
How many trees can you identify? This interactive workshop will examine different types of trees in Maine and explore how each has been used in the past (and present). Use parts of a tree to make your own art afterward!

Oyster Observers | February 14
What do oysters have in common with a coffee filter? Let's find out! Come learn about oyster habitats, and what role they play in them! Leave with your very own oyster shell craft.

From Sky to Sea | March 14
How do tides work? How did sailors navigate before GPS? Look up! Let's use our senses to learn about the sun and moon and how they affect the tides, and how constellations can be useful for getting around.

Remarkable Raptors | April 11
Do you have what it takes to be a bird of prey? Join us in learning more about Bald Eagles and Ospreys. Examine bones, flap your wings, measure wingspan, and make a raptor mask!

The Power of Plants | May 9
Can you identify all of the flora and fauna outside on the museum's campus? Come explore the wonders and uses for the various plants in our gardens and better understand how they survive and thrive. Take part in a scavenger hunt and hands-on experiments before making your very own "plant pet" to take home.

Bravo Zulu

Congratulations to Sarah Timm, who has accepted a position at Portland Museum of Art as the Peggy L. Osher Head of Education. We are so proud that she is taking the next step in her career and happy to have another Maine museum connection. As a result, Luke Gates-Milardo, former museum educator and exhibit designer, has stepped in to lead the new Exhibits & Learning Department, that recently also added Kaylie Borden-O'Brien as Museum Education Specialist (read more about Kaylie and why her name may ring a bell on page 10), as well as Emily Clark-Kramer, Exhibit Designer.

Welcome and bravo zulu to Kori Tanzer, joining our Visitor Experience team and Stacie Williams, our new Assistant Special Events Manager.

Left to Right: Nyugen E. Smith, artist, Luke Gates-Milardo, Director of Exhibits & Learning, Sarah Timm, Peggy L. Osher Head of Education & *Re|Sounding* exhibit co-curator, Beth Holmberg, volunteer blacksmith, Emily Clark-Kramer, Exhibit Designer.

Our Favorite Annual Events

Community Day | May 18
Free admission and the official start of season with daily lighthouse & nature cruises, shipyard tours, traditional skills, and demonstrations..

Maine Maritime Museum Annual Gala | July 10
THE party of the summer! Join us in celebrating everything the museum accomplishes and raise our bidding paddles for an even brighter future.

Pints on the Pier | September 14
Our annual beer tasting festival with live music, food trucks, oysters, lawn games, and more!

Collection Stewardship: Core Standards

When arriving at the museum, astute visitors may notice the sticker on the front door recognizing our status as an AAM-accredited institution and at the same time have no idea what it means. As a testament to our commitment to excellence, we participate in the voluntary accreditation program offered by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM), the largest professional organization setting standards in the museum field. Did you know less than 1% of American museums achieve this designation?

Every 10 years, we embark on this process to hold ourselves accountable by demonstrating how we adhere to "Core Standards" set for varying areas of operation. This includes Collections Stewardship which is defined as the "careful, sound, and responsible management of that which is entrusted to a museum's care."

AAM Core Standards for Collections Stewardship:

- *Owns, exhibits, or uses collections that are appropriate to its mission.*
- *Legally, ethically, and effectively manages, documents, cares for and uses the collections.*
- *Conducts collections-related research according to appropriate scholarly standards.*
- *Strategically plans for the use and development of its collections.*
- *Guided by its mission, provides public access to its collections while ensuring their preservation.*

In practice this means...

We collect items appropriate to our mission and make sure our audiences get good use out of them. These items are used for exhibitions such as *Lost and Found: Sounds of the Maine Coast, Women Behind the Lens: The Photography of Emma D. Sewall, Josephine Ginn Banks, & Abbie F. Minott,* and the upcoming exhibition *Re|Sounding.* Our education programs interact with the collection often: field trips utilizing object-based learning, our Sense of Place RSU 1 program, and even a visiting Maine College of Art & Design class has found inspiration for their next artwork. Collaboration with curatorial staff is essential in developing educational initiatives and programs, which draw on collections to make connections to maritime heritage and meet the needs of the institution and its audiences.

Kelly Page, Curator of Collections, Chris Timm, Executive Director, Catherine Cyr, Associate Curator, and Luke Gates-Milardo, Director of Exhibits & Learning work together to de-install the half-hull model of *Wyoming* as part of the upcoming Percy & Small Shipyard exhibit refresh, slated to open in 2026.

We care for collections by providing secure storage in appropriate environments. Conditions are assessed, risks are planned for, and restorative action is taken as needed. This year, we revisited our emergency and salvage procedures. This review has led to an expanded cache of emergency supplies and updating our salvage priority lists across collection and gallery spaces.

We document collections to know what we have and what we need. This means recording where they came from and contextualizing historical significance in line with current scholarship, thereby increasing accessibility. With the help of volunteers, collections files have been digitized and added to the collections management database, and archival collections have been surveyed for key words and people.

By following best practices, we ensure our collections are properly cared for and accessible to all who wish to learn from them. AAM puts it plainly, "Know what you have, know what you need, know where it is, take good care of it; and make sure someone gets something good out of it, especially your neighbors and the people you care about."

Did you know *Clarissa Ann* is the oldest surviving figurehead from a Maine vessel? Attributed to shipcarver Nathaniel Winsor, the figurehead was created in 1824 and became a prominent feature on the brig *Clarissa Ann,* built by the Houghton shipyard right here in Bath.

You can now learn more about this figurehead and many other fascinating objects from over 140 American institutions through Decorative Arts Trust's new website Collecting250.org. Decorative Arts Trust is celebrating the upcoming United States Semiquincentennial by featuring 250 objects that explore the rich and diverse history of America. Check out our entry and so much more!

Spotlight: Meet Museum Educator Kaylie Borden O'Brien

This summer, the Exhibits and Learning team was thrilled to welcome Kaylie Borden O'Brien as our new Museum Education Specialist. We recently sat down with Kaylie to talk about education, museums, and more!

Q: Astute members, volunteers, and visitors may remember this isn't your first role at Maine Maritime Museum. Can you tell us a bit about your history with the museum?

A: I started working at the museum in 2019 as crew on *Mary E.* At that time, I was transitioning from working in the traditional sailing industry to classroom teaching and was pleased to find a way to become a teacher who sails! I co-led Mariners' Adventure Camp and have been involved in different ways as the camp has evolved. I'm excited to be back at the Mariners' Adventure helm for 2026!

During my time as a classroom teacher, I stayed connected by bringing my students on field trips to the museum. I also invited museum educators to my classroom for a scientific communication lesson built around *Sea Change: Darkness and Light in the Gulf of Maine.*

Q: What is your favorite object currently on display in the museum?

A: The masthead from the *Luther Little* (c. 1917) that lives in the blacksmith's shop. It's something that would have been totally commonplace 100 years ago—indeed, there were three others just like it on the same vessel—but today its scale is stunning. It puts so much into perspective: how huge cargo schooners were at the end of the age of sail, how heavily they had to be built to effectively harness natural forces, how much custom metalwork had to be produced, the size of the trees that were sourced for mast timbers. The *Luther Little* was the semi-truck of its day, until one day it was tied up, abandoned, and left to sit in the mud long enough to become "history."

Q: How do you enjoy spending your free time?

A: I love getting outside! I try to go hiking or paddling or sailing whenever I have the chance. I also spend a lot of time in my garden/cooking with garden goods and working on projects with my husband around our old house or with friends on their wooden boats.

This summer's Mariners Adventure Camp had our very first session open exclusively to female, female-identifying, and nonbinary campers.

Q: If you were to create an exhibit with artifacts from your life, what are three objects that would absolutely have to be featured?

A: My sailing rig (my knife and marlinspike with their sheaths and lanyards) has followed me my whole adult life, picking up additions and dents and rust along the way. Each piece comes with a story from a different boat or person across the country.

Then there's a giant bowl-sized mug that a friend gifted to me. It's comically large and very frilly, but I've never gone a day without drinking copious amounts of tea from it.

Lastly, this exhibit would need a highly curated selection of books to replicate the to-read pile on my nightstand. I choose books entirely based on recommendations from family and friends (so I always have someone to discuss them with), and this display would be a reminder of the people I love and the conversations we share.

Maine Maritime Museum has a robust education program, hosting schools from all around Maine, sending museum educators into classrooms, and enriching summer vacations with our day camps. To learn more about everything our Exhibits & Learning team has going on, head over to our website, mainemaritimemuseum.org/education.

The Real "Circus Ship"

by Kelly Page
Curator of Collections

A central theme of the museum's current exhibit, *Upon That Isle in Maine: The Story & Works of Chris Van Dusen,* is that creative inspiration can come from anywhere—your surroundings, a fleeting thought, or even a historic event. One of Van Dusen's most beloved books, *The Circus Ship,* tells the tale of a group of animals that seek refuge on an island after the steamship transporting them wrecks. Seeking to evade a return to their performative servitude, they camouflage themselves throughout the community, are embraced by the islanders, and seem to be on their way to happily ever after. Did you know Van Dusen loosely based this book on a true story from Maine's maritime past: the 1836 sinking of the *Royal Tar* and its unusual passengers from Burgess and Dexter's Zoological Institute? This deeply tragic event presents insight into both the growing pains of transportation technology and popular entertainment in the first half of the 19th century.

Woodcut from Charles Ellms' *The Tragedy of the Seas; or, Sorrow on the Ocean, Lake, and River, from Shipwreck, Plague, Fire and Famine;* 1841; New York, Collins, Keese & Co.

Following the success of late 18th-century exotic animal displays in major American cities, traveling animal exhibitions called menageries emerged as a profitable venture in the early 1800s. Unlike the circus, which, at this time, focused on human acrobatics, menageries emphasized the educational display of exotic animals, often adopting scholarly names to appeal to public respectability.

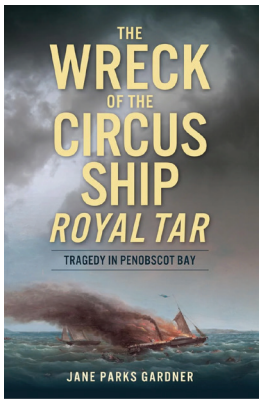
Steamships like the *Royal Tar* enabled faster travel, expanding both the reach and profitability of such tours. Launched in 1835, the *Royal Tar* operated between St. John and Portland, connecting the region to larger transportation networks and urban centers. In October 1836, after a summer spent touring the Canadian Maritimes, the ill-fated troupe boarded the vessel as part of the return journey to its home base in Boston.

Unfortunately, the very technology that made this revolutionary method of travel possible was dangerously unregulated. Boiler accidents were a frequent and deadly occurrence on steamboats in the United States. Attributed to poor design, lack of maintenance, and untrained operators, these events resulted in thousands of deaths in the early years of steam travel. In the case of the *Royal Tar,* the boiler's water level dropped too low, and the resulting extreme heat caused the wooden-hulled steamer to catch fire while in the waters of Penobscot Bay.

Poor safety decisions worsened the tragedy. Lifeboats were removed to make room on deck for caged animals. Fortunately, a nearby schooner on patrol, USRC *Veto* assisted in the rescue, saving 40 passengers. Still, 32 of the 93 people on board perished as well as the full complement of exotic animals: two lions, a tiger, a leopard, an Asian elephant, two camels, a gnu, snakes, and birds. Four of six caravan horses also drowned.

Public outcry over repeated tragedies pressured the government to act. In response, Congress passed the Steamboat Act of 1838, the first federal law to regulate boiler safety. However, enforcement was weak, and a stronger version followed in 1852, mandating inspections, licensing of engineers, and safety standards, marking a crucial shift toward federal oversight of industrial safety.

Though born from tragedy, the unusual story of the *Royal Tar* lives on through Van Dusen's imaginative retelling—transforming a historical disaster at sea into a narrative of resilience and community.

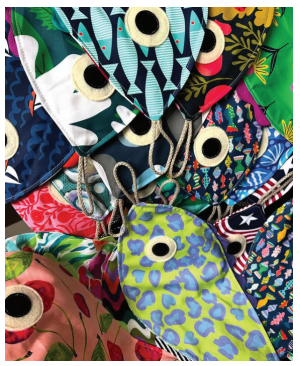


Read more in *The Wreck of the Circus Ship Royal Tar: Tragedy in Penobscot Bay* by Jane Parks Gardner, available in our store online or in-person.

What's New in the Museum Store

by Amanda Pleau
Marketing & Communications Manager

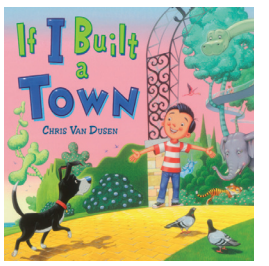
This issue, we're highlighting a selection of products inspired by many of our current exhibits: *Sustaining Maine's Waters* (FishBellies), Percy & Small Shipyard (*Wyoming* Sea Bag), *BIW: Building America's Navy* (Battleship Block Set), *Upon That Isle in Maine: The Story & Works of Chris Van Dusen (If I Built a Town), Into the Lantern: A Lighthouse Experience* (Pocket Lighthouse), and *Re|Sounding (Visual Language of Wabanaki Art).*



FishBellies | become heating pads when microwaved or cold packs when stored in the freezer. These guppies are handmade right here in Bath, Maine with 100% cotton and filled with extra-clean kernel corn.

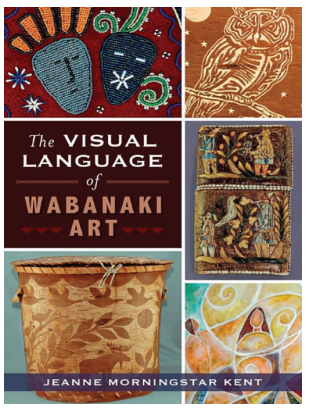
***Wyoming* Sea Bag** | Sea Bags creates durable, multi-purpose totes, handcrafted in Maine from recycled sail cloth. In a special partnership, they designed these custom bags made from flags that once flew atop the masts of our *Wyoming* evocation, a large-scale sculpture on the site where the original ship was constructed in 1909. The evocation is a tribute to the largest wooden sailing vessel ever built in the United States. Not your typical schooner OR your typical Sea Bag. Each vintage tote is one-of-a-kind and truly unique.

Destroyer Mini Block Set | This set will delight the Bath Iron Works enthusiast in your family, 593 pieces for ages 13+!



***If I Built a Town* by Chris Van Dusen** | The celebrated Maine author's newest book is now a *New York Times* bestseller—inquire about the availability of signed copies today!

Pocket Lighthouse | Harness the magnifying power of a Fresnel lens with your smartphone; turn your phone's flashlight into a magnificent beam of light. Made in the US.



***Visual Language of Wabanaki Art* by Jeanne Morningstar Kent** | For centuries, the people of the Wabanaki Nations used signs, symbols and designs to communicate with one another. Their visual language helped keep their teachings and culture alive. Their designs have evolved over time and taken on different meanings, and now these objects are considered art. Immerse yourself in the visual language of the Wabanaki people and learn how their art was—and continues to be—preserved and celebrated.

This summer, we received a marketing grant from the Maine Office of Tourism to promote Oyster Tasting cruises and Burnt Island Lighthouse Adventure cruises. We hired Instagram stars Elizabeth and James Clark, better known as Traveling Mainers, to come to Bath, hop on *Merrymeeting,* and share their experience with the world. They had a blast!

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I have also enclosed $_____as a contribution to help support the museum.

Please make check payable to Maine Maritime Museum and return to: 243 Washington Street, Bath, ME 04530
Dues and other contributions are tax deductible as provided by law.